

MAKING A MEANING

Freshman



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Educators are guided by federal, state and local mandates to adopt higher academic standards for all students while increasing the number of students entering and achieving in postsecondary educational studies. Simultaneously, our students have unprecedented personal, social and economic distractions that

compete with their vision, energy and motivation to stay in school and learn. They respond to surveys and polls warning us that they are concerned they lack the skills and knowledge necessary to build a successful future.

So what does it take to help students find intrinsic motivation—the will and skills to cultivate positive attitudes toward

learning that create hope and plans for their futures? One step is the natural blending of a freshman transition course and 10-year plan with service-learning. In the resulting promise of school and community collaboration, students engage in projects and opportunities that address their own needs and the needs of schools, organizations and communities, while also meeting rigorous academic standards. Such opportunities are as varied as the communities they serve.

Star Hunter notes in an e-mail to us that while she was the service-learning coordinator at Moorpark College in California, she found that “any discipline could incorporate and benefit from applied learning experiences, ranging from tackling school-readiness projects for foster students entering high school to providing hands-on instruction to grade-school students. Faculty who incorporated service-learning into their courses reported that it enriched the teaching and learning experience.” Blending the concepts of freshman transition—becoming identity-achieved, envisioning a productive future, recognizing the impact of career choice on personal lifestyle—and service-learning enables students to meaningfully connect to relevant learning outside the traditional classroom at a pivotal point in their educational careers.

Mary Ellen Earnhardt at Montana’s Office of Public Instruction recently received a proposal for green mining. A

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local company, Poterblocks, proposed to work with students in grades seven to 12 in Troy County to recycle mine waste into marketable materials for stream restoration in their community. "We look for supports around the school day," said Earnhardt. "Expanding the quality of learning opportunities meets the array of interests, visions and learning styles of our diverse student population. Transition and service-learning opportunities allow students to experience the world of work and find out what's beyond the classroom. They apply real skills to everyday life."

Engaging, Relevant Learning is Key to Successful Transitions

Student engagement is an essential part of the many transitions adolescents must make on their way to self-sufficient adulthood. The George Washington University's Freshman Transition Initiative (FTI) has addressed these critical transitions by designing and promoting a student-authored 10-year plan for education and career goals within a standards-driven freshman transition course. Note that while freshman transition is designed for either the eighth or ninth grade, because of high school redesign initiatives, it is preferable to start it in the ninth grade. The FTI's Course Standards for Freshman Transition Classes are meant to be integrated into all courses, including math, English, and career and technical education. The stan-

dards provide the framework, theme and direction for engaged learning because they help students:

- Learn to project into the future and to understand the consequences of their actions and the choices made today.
- Complete formal assessments to help them establish and consolidate their identity, becoming identity-achieved.
- Analyze the effect of personal interest and aptitudes upon education and career planning.
- Recognize the impact of career choice on personal lifestyle.
- Recognize the impact their commitment to education has on their future lifestyle and life satisfaction.
- Demonstrate the skills to locate, analyze and apply career information.
- Know the process for career planning and educational preparation.
- Apply the skill sets required to succeed (both in the classroom and the workforce).
- Demonstrate the importance of productive work habits and attitudes.
- Know that many skills are common to a variety of careers and that these skills can be transferred from one career opportunity to another.
- Know the process used to locate and secure entry-level employment.
- Know the effect change has on society and career opportunities.

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Using the 10-year plan to personalize learning and monitor student achievement becomes increasingly important each year of high school. Teachers engaging in the FTI Caring and Responsive Educators conversations encourage students to reflect and interpret the meaning and insights gained from learning experiences. Course concepts may intersect with discovery at a service-learning site,

thus spurring conversations about, and changes to, the student's 10-year plan. It is during these conversations and reflections that meaningful connections occur, truly bringing learning to life.

Benefits of Service-Learning that Facilitate the Transition

Benefits associated with service-learning are aligned with the goals of the standards, including increasing postsecondary matriculation and completion and seeing students become self-sufficient, responsible citizens. The philosophies of each align to strengthen the other, with a vision of fully preparing students for the lives ahead of them. Students who participate in service-learning experience positive outcomes in these areas:

- **Personal/Social Development.** Students increase self-efficacy, resiliency, multicultural awareness and self-confidence. They are less likely to engage in risky behaviors that may prove detrimental to their futures.
- **Academic Achievement.** Students who take part in service-learning activities have higher attendance, are more engaged and make higher grades in school.
- **Citizenship.** Students become engaged in their communities, knowledgeable of civic and ethical responsibility, engage in collaborative teamwork, and are more aware of the socio-cultural contexts surrounding their communities.
- **Career Awareness.** Service-learning experiences help students become more aware of career options and interests. They receive firsthand lessons in the development of work-related behaviors, attitudes and skills (Billing, 2002).

Students armed with the insight and information that a comprehensive freshman transition course and service-

learning setting provide become eager to master the rigorous coursework required in today's world. By providing the necessary leadership, experiences and supports, educators cultivate their students' sense of belonging, ownership of learning and ability to make good choices. Challenged by the realization that children are learning all the time and not just in school, Earnhardt works with communities to find positive in- and out-of-school opportunities.

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Through collaborative partnerships, innovative practices are created that align with high academic rigor. Students "try on" jobs, create realistic goals, and take responsibility for their own actions to achieve them. Research, projects, reports and presentations become authentic assessments and evaluations. Continuous review of 10-year plans ensures that students monitor their work.

"The key to a successful program is activation of 'student powered' learning plans," says Earnhardt. "Students are well on their way to becoming college and career ready."

Helping all students envision their future as productive adults is imperative to academic achievement and postsecondary matriculation. The examples presented here parallel what career and technical educators know and do to engage students. Employing open communication and a spirit of cooperation while focusing

on high standards, we showcase what we do best—helping our colleagues figure out what works, then demonstrating that it is not so much about having ideas as it is about harnessing the will to implement them. ■

Resources for Implementing Engaging Projects

Expanded student learning opportunities take on different forms depending on the needs of your students, school and community. There are many resources available for establishing and implementing a Freshman Transition/service-learning blend.

Freshman Transition Initiative
www.freshmantransition.org

National Service Learning Clearinghouse
www.servicelearning.org

Corporation for National and Community Service
www.nationalservice.gov

National Service-Learning Partnership
www.service-learningpartnership.org

References

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